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A production of Tom Stoppard's radio play, "Albert's Bridge," by high school students in Washington, D.C., showed that stage production and film effects could be used together effectively and that high school students were competent to handle difficult productions. Students were given the responsibility for photography, sound, and other technical matters. The play was produced on a bare stage using, as the only backdrop and scenery, three 10' x 10' screens on which were projected slides and 16mm footage to describe and augment the action on stage. The specific stage innovations in this production included (1) actors performing on stage in front of a backdrop of moving pictures to give the effect of "alive-ness," (2) sequences of live action on stage interspersed with the action moved completely to the screen, and (3) scenes in which actors onstage conversed with actors on film. This experiment showed that film can be used effectively if knowledgeable teachers use creative methods with available materials and combine films with other media such as the written word. (SW)

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MIXED MEDIA IN HIGH SCHOOL

. . . a Case History

BY KATHLEEN KARR. "Mixed media" is a very current term, one much used and much misunderstood. What does it really mean, and how can it be utilized within the high school environment? One very successful interpretation and answer can be found in the recent mixed-media production of Tom Stoppard's radio play, *Albert's Bridge* at St. Albans School for Boys, Washington, D.C., under the direction of the resident film teacher, Albert Ihde.[1] A production history of this event can be enlightening to the educator awash on the sea of the new emphasis on film in the secondary school curriculum, and not quite sure how much and how far film can be taken and accepted by the students.

After a one semester test-run film history and production course, St. Albans was impressed by the enthusiasm with which the students took to the medium,[2] and gave Mr. Ihde the go ahead to organize and direct one of the school's annual dramatic productions. The goal was set: to try to effectively mix a stage production with film effects.

Tom Stoppard's radio play, *Albert's Bridge,* was chosen precisely because it was a radio play. There were no ready made stage or scenery directions to follow. A request for production clearance was sent to Mr. Stoppard's theatrical agent in London and Mr. Stoppard answered that he was currently revising the play for a stage production and would prefer St. Albans to use the revised work. Mr. Ihde wrote back and explained his plan for a mixed-media presentation. Tom Stoppard evinced an interest in the production and gave St. Albans exclusive free rights to use his work. Production was begun immediately.

A brief summary of the play may be of help here in determining why it was chosen, and just how effectively it could be presented. Albert is a young man just out of college and unwilling to join his father's business. He is a budding philosopher and prefers to watch the world go by rather than be part of it. As such, he takes a job as a bridge painter, and soon finds himself the sole painter of enormous span bridge. His job is to start at one end and paint across to the other, a feat taking eight years. It is a cyclic job. Every eight years Albert will return to the other end of the bridge and begin again. He looks forward to painting it completely at least four times. It will be a full life:

ALBERT: (on top of bridge, painting).
In eight years I'll be pushing thirty, and the
Clufton Bay Bridge will be a silver bridge.
I'm the bridge man,
web-spinning silvering spiderman
crawling between heaven and earth on a
cantilevered span
cat's cradle in the sky . . .
look down at the toy ships
where the sea pounds under toy trains to
toy towns
under my hand.
Am I the spider or the fly?
I'm the bridge man. . . .

In the following two years several events occur (Albert's marriage, the birth of his child), and Albert paints one quarter of the bridge. However, the bridge council soon notice that the rate of deterioration on the unpainted side of the bridge is greater than they had estimated. To compensate, they decide to paint the entire remainder of the bridge in one day. Eighteen hundred men are hired and marched onto the bridge, each with his silver paint bucket. One should not march eighteen hundred men onto a bridge, for the tension is more than the girders can stand. The bridge, complete with eighteen hundred men and Albert, collapses. The end.

Mr. Ihde and his students were presented with the difficulty of expressing the marvelous humor and absurdity of this play within visual terms. The students responded enthusiastically, both to the contemporaneous style of the work, and to the technical problems involved, (proving that high school students are capable of and prefer working with productions other than the typically watered down Rodgers and Hammerstein and Samuel French scripts they have traditionally performed.

The object was to have the play enacted on a bare stage, with three 10′ x 10′ screens as the only backdrop and scenery. On these screens were to be projected consecutively and simultaneously, throughout the length of the play, slides and 16mm footage that would describe and augment the action on stage. A six week production schedule was set up. Few changes were made in the original script. The scene was changed from England to America; the original music was substituted with the then popular "Up, Up and Away;" and "Love Is Blue" was used for a filmed courtship sequence between Albert and his wife that was added to the script.

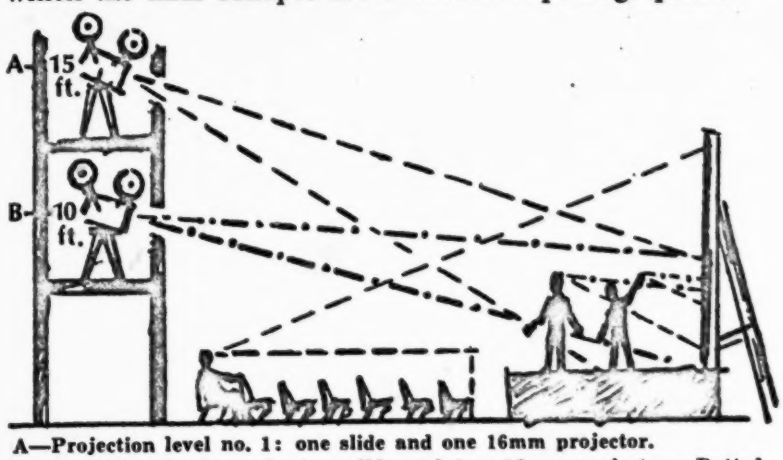
The students themselves were given technical responsibilities. They read and discussed the script. A full production crew of students was utilized. Brad Beukema, a student, shot all the slides used in the presentation, and William Bowman was student assistant to Mr. Ihde, the director, and as such was with him on location for all the filming sequences. Tony Schenck took full responsibility for sound in the final production; other students gave the film cues and coordinated all the fades and dissolves. For the final production, these student technicians achieved a highly coordinated show that union technicians would have had trouble with. They adapted very well to the critical timing problems, to the complications of combining stage, screen, lights and sound, and especially to the sheer newness of the entire production.

Final production figures: in the six week preparation stage 2,000 feet of 16mm film was shot. After editing, 1,000 feet was used. Approximately thirty slides were

[1] Mr. Ihde, a filmmaker in his own right, has a short film, "The Student," being distributed by Contemporary-McGraw-Hill Films and is currently working on a feature length film, "Prisoners of War."

[2] One student film resulting from this course won second prize at the recent Student Filmmakers Convention in New York.

used. The total production cost was $1200, dispersed over costs of film, slides, the rental of equipment, costuming, etc. A sixteen-foot tower, four feet square with two levels was constructed on which three slide projectors and three 16mm projectors were mounted (see illustration), and a three foot scale model of a bridge was constructed, from which the final collapse scene could be photographed.



A—Projection level no. 1: one slide and one 16mm projector.
B—Projection level no. 2: two slide and two 16mm projectors. Dotted lines indicate projection patterns for the projectors.

The stage innovations used in this mixed media production were: 1) live actors onstage performing in front of a backdrop of moving pictures which gave the effect of alive-ness; 2) sequences of live action on stage interspersed with the action moved completely to the screen for several sequences; and 3) remarkable scenes in which actors onstage carried on conversation with actors on film. This latter innovation was termed exceptionally difficult to handle by professionals who were consulted because of its critical timing. The students involved worked on this particular technique constantly for one week until they had perfected it.

The final presentation before an audience was the crucial moment. No one knew how they would react. St. Albans soon found that it was getting a larger audience than at any time in the history of its dramatic productions, and a large percentage of the audience was not of the school family. Notices of the production by the Washington drama critics brought full houses. The production covered its costs in a three day run.

The final purpose of this case history is to show that film and film teaching can be used effectively both within the school curriculum and within a school's extra-curricular activities. Film is not Mr. Fixit; it will not cure all our educational problems. But used properly, film can help our students respond effectively and imaginatively to a visually oriented world. In the final analysis, three items are necessary to achieve this effective use of film, whether inside or outside the classroom:

1) a knowledgable teacher
2) a fresh and ingenious approach to materials at hand
3) the will to work with and utilize film within other existing media, particularly the written word.

The use of mixed media productions, then, can radically change the film viewing experience. No longer must film in the educational sense be equated with a single rectangle of light projected at one end of a darkened room, followed by a musty discussion. Film itself has never been limited; educators just have not been aware of its creative aspects.

At the time "Albert's Bridge" was staged at St. Albans, Mrs. Karr was Film Director of the Fine Arts Council at Catholic University. Currently she is teaching in the English Dept. at Barrington (R.I.) High School.